

Fire Support and the Maneuver Commander at Dien Bien Phu: Tragedy and Triumph

by Captain Stephen L. Curtis

Honorable Mention

You must take care to choose an elevated position in order to fall upon the enemy with greater advantage. But the most important point is not to gather your army on a plain situated at the foot of a mountain which the enemy might be able to occupy unimpeded; for with his artillery he would crush you from the neighboring heights; in vain would you try to prevent his batteries from hitting you ceaselessly and without impediment. Embarrassed by your own troops, you would find it impossible to harm him.

Niccolo Machiavelli
1469-1527

A maneuver commander in a rapid-deployment force fighting a come-as-you-are battle far from his logistical base depends on both land-and air-based fire support. In most cases, the maneuver unit's survival depends on the successful application of fire support. Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada (25 October to 2 November 1983) showed that our current doctrine needed more work to address joint fire support planning. It also showed how critical time and information shortages can be.

The operation was an overall success, due in part to our massive superiority in arms and men against a relatively unorganized band of Cuban Marxists. However, there's one clear and tragic example of how vital fire support is and how vulnerable it is to failure in the face of a truly determined guerrilla force. It was the ordeal faced by two French artillery groups 36 years ago, 13 March to 7 May 1954, at a place called Dien Bien Phu.

Background

It was into this valley, three miles wide by 11 miles long, that the French parachuted five infantry battalions and supporting artillery in November of 1953. They had been fighting the Vietminh to maintain control of North Vietnam since 1946. Vietminh offensives in 1950 had

resulted in the capture of the French outposts near the Chinese border, giving the Vietminh control of the Highlands and backing the French into the Red River Delta behind the De Lattre Line.

In 1951, the French were attacked by the Vietminh in a succession of battles in the Red River Delta, culminating in the battle of Hoa Binh. At this battle, the French had occupied a position deep in enemy territory, attempting to draw the Vietminh into a set-piece battle. The position straddled a river in a small valley and was surrounded by mountains. The Vietminh surrounded the French, then destroyed their planes, ambushed their supply convoys and narrowly missed annihilating them. The French retaliated in 1952 with Operation Lorraine, a series of battles that achieved a stalemate at best.

Then in November of 1953, again they were looking for the decisive battle that would bring the Vietminh to its knees. It was to be called Operation Castor, and the French Commander-in-Chief, General Henri Navarre, chose a site in the Thai highlands, again deep in the heart of Vietminh territory.

The Plan

The Vietminh had controlled the highlands because the cross-country mobility of their soldiers and artillery

effectively neutralized the French superiority in artillery and air support. The only other difference between this upcoming battle and the one at Hoa Binh was that the French supply line was 200 miles longer and the Vietminh firepower 300 percent greater.

The French maneuver commander at Dien Bien Phu, General Christian de Castries, expected to wage a battle of annihilation. His plan, he said, hinged on three operations:

(1) *On an ensemble of five centers of resistance which form the infrastructure of the static defense and which shall define on the terrain the area of the desirable battlefield;*

(2) *On the ability to concentrate on every point of the battlefield at least four fifths of all the firepower available to me; and*

(3) *On a full scale of counterattacks . . . (Hell in a Very Small Place by Bernard B. Fall, Lipincott, 1967).*

French Artillery

To support this plan, the artillery commander, Colonel Charles Piroth, had employed six batteries of 105-mm howitzers, four 155-mm howitzers and three 120-mm mortar companies (see Figure 1). He also employed observers on outlying hills and six spotter planes to observe rounds. He boasted to General de Castries that "No



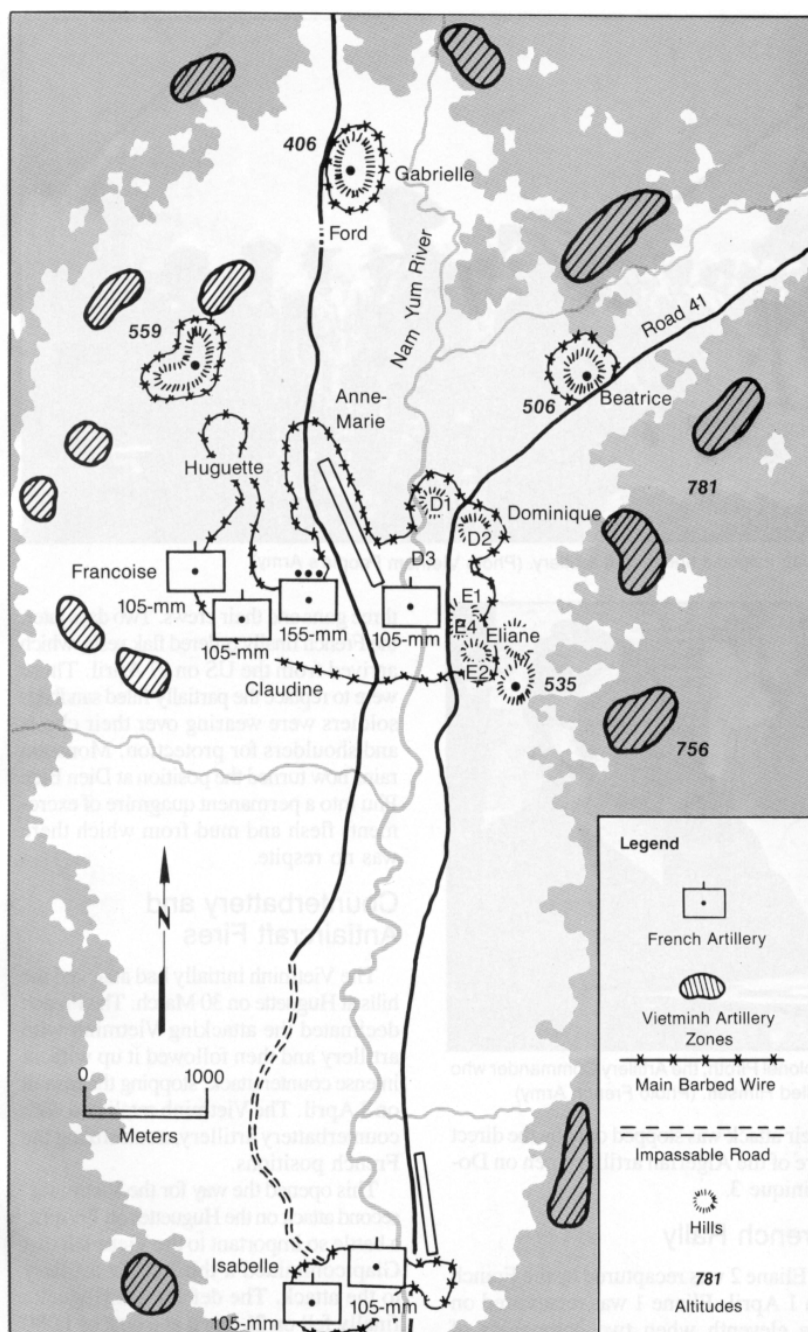


Figure 1: The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 13 March 1954.

Vietminh cannon will be able to fire three rounds before being destroyed by my artillery" and that they would be "unable to supply their pieces" in that terrain (Fall, 1967).

Colonel Piroth emplaced his guns on hills so they were mutually supporting. The guns at Isabelle couldn't reach Gabrielle and Beatrice, so these two outposts were covered by 120-mm mortars to compensate for the difference and to provide

local support. The French positions at Dien Bien Phu were uncamouflaged and in the open to allow them to fire in all directions. Soldiers had shoddily built bunkers and no flak vests.

Complacency abounded because historically the Vietminh used artillery sparingly, and when they did, it was never with guns larger than 75-mm. In addition, the French figured the Vietminh artillery couldn't reach them with the trajectory



The Vietminh had a 500-mile supply route.



Photo French Army

The shell casings piled up after an artillery barrage.

they would need to clear the crests of the surrounding hills. Surely, they thought, the Vietminh would not fire from the forward slopes, which nobody had tried since Napoleon and which would expose them to merciless French fire.

Vietminh Artillery

The Vietminh commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, had indeed decided to attack the French, but not until he had overwhelming firepower. He first had his army stealthily hack out a 500-mile road back to the Chinese border at Mu Nam Quan, large enough for their bicycles and 800 Molotova trucks. He then succeeded in infiltrating, via this supply line into the valley, at least 36 105-mm howitzers, as well as 48 75-mm pack howitzers and 104 other field guns of 57-mm caliber or greater. He also was able to supply at least 103,000 rounds of artillery ammunition during the battle. Thus before the battle began, the Vietminh had a three-to-one superiority in numbers of artillery pieces with no shortage of resupply.

Once the guns arrived on the battlefield, the Vietminh dug them into the hillsides in bombproof dugouts, complete with camouflaged portholes that hid their flashes when they fired. The guns were

dug at least six feet into the ground with covers that closed before and after firing. Collocated with them were massed antiaircraft artillery camouflaged in the same manner. These positions on the hills also made the guns impervious to the monsoon floods. This was the situation when the first rounds slammed into the French positions at 1700 hours on 13 March 1954.

The Battle

It is known that an army can pass wherever a goat has passed; it is possible to hoist cannon with ropes onto the highest mountains . . . and to lay waste an enemy camp which did not expect to see a hail of cannonballs fall from the clouds.

Prince Charles Joseph de Ligne
Austrian General and Writer
1735-1814

The Vietminh destroyed the French observation posts and six spotter planes within 48 hours. They then neutralized the main French artillery at Claudine and Dominique, leaving Beatrice and Gabrielle without artillery support. The mortars on the two outposts couldn't hope to survive this pounding, and the two outposts fell to the Vietminh by the second day of the battle.

French Fold

It soon became evident that all the artillery Colonel Piroth had wouldn't be enough to destroy the Vietminh in their trenches or their guns that were hidden from detection. He was unable to put together a fire plan as his batteries were decisively engaged and never could have executed it. The French infantry tried a counterattack without artillery, losing two entire companies before it was stopped cold.

Colonel Piroth felt directly responsible for the cemeteries that used to be Beatrice and Gabrielle. Despondent and full of guilt, he committed suicide on 15 March by blowing himself up with a grenade. On that day, a monsoon hit, caving in most of the French bunkers and filling them with water. The Vietminh swarmed toward Anne-Marie and began constricting the French with trench works.

The Vietminh then proceeded to assault the "five hills" complex of positions at Dominique 1 and 2 and Eliane 1, 2 and 4 after an artillery barrage destroyed the mortars on the positions. Even though the Vietminh were too close to the French for their own artillery to support them,



Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place

Giap inspects antiaircraft artillery. (Photo Vietnam People's Army)



Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place

Colonel Piroth, the Artillery Commander who Killed Himself. (Photo French Army)

their attack was stopped only by the direct fire of the Algerian artillerymen on Dominique 3.

French Rally

Eliane 2 was recaptured by the French on 1 April. Eliane 1 was recaptured on the eleventh when two companies of Foreign Legion troops under the cover of artillery fire defeated a Vietminh battalion. The French held these positions until the end of the battle, by which time soldiers were stacking corpses for protection from the Vietminh artillery. Only then did the French begin digging trench works between their gun positions and strongpoints.

On 16 April, the French had one of their few lucky strikes against the enemy when its 155-mm battery scored a direct hit on a Vietminh 75-mm gun battery, destroying

three guns and their crews. Two days later, the French finally ordered flak vests, which arrived from the US on 27 April. These were to replace the partially filled sandbags soldiers were wearing over their chests and shoulders for protection. Monsoon rains now turned the position at Dien Bien Phu into a permanent quagmire of excrement, flesh and mud from which there was no respite.

Counterbattery and Antiaircraft Fires

The Vietminh initially had attacked the hills at Huguette on 30 March. The French decimated the attacking Vietminh with artillery and then followed it up with an intense counterattack, stopping the assault on 3 April. The Vietminh retaliated with counterbattery artillery, neutralizing the French positions.

This opened the way for the Vietminh's second attack on the Huguettes on 19 April, a battle so important to the Vietminh that Giap committed a third of his artillery to the attack. The defenses at Huguette finally fell on 21 April at a cost of 1,080 Vietminh and 500 French lives.

By then, French air support had all but stopped because of the accuracy of the Vietminh antiaircraft fire. As thick as any in World War II, it had so far shot 48 planes out of the sky.

Defeat

By 16 April after repeated Vietminh assaults, the French were down to only one 155-mm howitzer and 300 rounds of ammunition for it with little chance of resupply. Fifty-six days of operating in

Field Artillery

waist-deep mud under constant fear of death had taken its toll on combatants on both sides as each wondered how much the other could endure.

The question was answered by the Vietminh. They hit the French with a new and devastating weapon in the form of Russian-made Katyusha rockets, which broke the back as well as the resolve of the French. The barrage destroyed most of the remaining bunkers and all but one of the remaining 105-mm howitzers. For those who were not part of the 30,084 dead and wounded of both sides strewn about the battlefield, the misery ended the next day.

Battle Analysis

The success or failure of each of the maneuver commander's fire support at this battle was decided in three areas: tactics at every level, logistics and intelligence estimates of enemy capabilities and actions.

Vietminh Tactics. The Vietminh fire support was successful partly because of superior tactics. The gun crews emplaced their howitzers and covered and concealed them in places thought impossible by the French. In addition, the Vietminh crews would dismantle and move their howitzers under fire to support their maneuver commanders. This undoubtedly required enormous effort and cost many lives.

The Vietminh artillerymen also were masters of camouflage; the French didn't recognize their positions in spite of the fact that most were on forward slopes and close to the main French positions.

The Vietminh held their attack until they had an overwhelming ability to mass fires. They held their attack in spite of the fact that every day they waited, the French grew stronger.

Vietminh Logistics. Giap's forces were able to demonstrate a logistical capability unmatched by the French. Considering they had no planes, they should have been at a disadvantage.

The Vietminh used the limitations of the jungle as an ally in affecting the perceptions of the French regarding its supply capabilities. This, combined with the Vietminh's hidden air-defense capability, was enough to lure the French into an unwinnable logistical situation.

Vietminh Intelligence. The Vietminh artillery was successful because it knew the enemy. The French soldiers were out of their element in jungle terrain, and their doctrine reflected this inexperience.

Giap knew the French would try to apply the lessons from the delta flatlands to the

Photo US Navy



A French medical evacuation helicopter comes under heavy fire at Dien Bien Phu.



The Vietminh artillery forced the French to surrender at Dien Bien Phu.

jungle highlands (such as tank warfare, static defense and aerial resupply). He purposely didn't fire his 105-mm howitzers before the start of the battle because he wanted the French to continue unaware of them in his preparations. As a result of the above factors, not only was the Vietminh artillery able to support its maneuver element, but it also accounted for 75 percent of all French casualties.

French Tactics. The French artillery positions lacked both survivability and mobility because they were on low, muddy ground with no cover or concealment. The positions also lacked decent bunkers for their personnel who were without flak vests for most of the battle.

The key to the success of the French position lay in the occupation of the hills at Beatrice and Gabrielle. If the Vietminh could take them, they would have a commanding view of the entire French position. By placing one-third of his artillery at Isabelle out of range of these positions, Colonel Piroth couldn't support General de Castries' plan to "concentrate on every point of the battlefield at least four-fifths of all the firepower available." The importance of this tactical omission can't be overstated.

French Logistics. The French logistical capability was shut down totally by Vietminh anti-aircraft artillery. This was due in part to inadequate suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) as well as an overreliance on airpower they didn't have. The French basically overestimated their own logistical ability and underestimated the ability of the Vietminh to neutralize it.

French Intelligence. Poor preparation for the battle on the part of the French fire supporters was largely the result of a condescending and overconfident attitude toward the Vietminh. Colonel Piroth failed to heed accurate intelligence reports on enemy artillery strengths and unorthodox gun emplacements and actually refused an offer of additional artillery from Hanoi before the battle.

Conclusion

This battle shows how vitally important fire support is to the maneuver commander. Its importance is graphically evident if we view the battle through a modified target value matrix (see Figure 2).

Fire support always must be synchronized with the maneuver commander's in-intent and thoroughly planned by competent

fire support coordinators (FSCOORDs) at all levels. Highly proficient SEAD and target acquisition as well as survivability measures and mobility can mean the difference between victory and defeat. These factors, not surprisingly, determine success or failure at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California. We also must know the enemy and the environment.

Field Artillerymen must be prepared for a battlefield calling for "individual stamina and fortitude, for the understanding and acceptance of battlefield conditions almost unimaginable in their demands on human endurance, for recognition in doctrine that these requirements exist and that they may very well have to be met" (*Street Without Joy*, Fall, Schocken Books, 1961). Our fire support, especially for a rapid-deployment or light force, must be prepared to accomplish what the French didn't at Dien Bien Phu.



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French Fire Support Effects on Vietnamh			Target Set	Vietminh Fire Support Effects on French		
D I S R U P T	D E L A Y	L I M I T		L I M I T	D E L A Y	D I S R U P T
			Command, Control and Communications	X		
		X	Fire Support	X	X	X
		X	Maneuver	X	X	
		X	Air Defense Artillery	N/A	N/A	N/A
		X	Engineer	X	X	
			Reconnaissance, Survey and Target Acquisition	X	X	X
N/A	N/A	N/A	Radio-Electronic Combat	N/A	N/A	N/A
N/A	N/A	N/A	Nuclear/Chemical	N/A	N/A	N/A
			Class III (Petroleum Oil and Lubricants)	X	X	X
			Class V (Ammunition)	X	X	X
			Class IX (Maintenance)	X	X	X
N/A	N/A	N/A	Airlift	X	X	X
			Lines of Communications (Logistical Routes)	X		

Figure 2: This Fire Support Assessment Matrix, a modified target value matrix, clearly shows the importance of fire support for the maneuver commanders in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.



The Vietminh hoist their flag over de Castries' bunker.

Historical Vignette: Field Artillery Tactics in the Spanish-American War

Although the importance of massing fires was one of the most significant lessons of the American Civil War, time erased the importance of this tactic. Rocked by the explosion of the *USS Maine* and other events, the United States went to war against Spain over Cuba in 1898. The American artillery's use of outdated tactics and obsolete guns caused it to play only a minor role in the Spanish-American War. Our inability to mass fires caused the Americans

to lose the advantage of firepower as a combat multiplier.

Organization

As finally organized, our V Corps included two divisions of infantry and one division of dismounted cavalry. Each infantry division had three brigades of three regiments each, while the cavalry division consisted of two, three-regiment brigades. Shortly

before embarkation at Tampa, Florida, getting ready to sail to Cuba, an independent brigade of two regular infantry regiments and a cavalry squadron joined V Corps.

In addition to the infantry and cavalry units, V Corps had a provisional Field Artillery battalion of four batteries under Major John Dillenback. The battalion had two batteries of siege artillery, a provisional battery of four Gatling guns under First Lieutenant John H. Parker, two engineer companies and a Signal Corps detachment with an observation balloon.

Aside from the three volunteer regiments—the 71st New York, the 2d Massachusetts and the Rough Riders—V Corps was essentially a standing army of long service. Even though the Corps was composed of veterans, none had seen any combat except for the Indian campaigns, which certainly didn't prepare the soldiers for combat against a European Army.

Equipment

For fire support, V Corps had M1885 and M1890 3.2-inch field guns that had been introduced during the previous 13 years. That direct-fire, breech-loading gun used black powder that emitted a white puff of smoke when fired, lacked a recoil system and had a range of 6,600 yards. Although the 3.2-inch piece was the Army's most modern, it was obsolete. European armies had smokeless powder, steel, rapid-fire breechloaders.

Equally importantly, American Field Artillerymen still relied upon direct fire, and the 3.2-inch gun's range allowed them to advance their guns right up to the infantry skirmish line.

The War

After completing a poor reconnaissance of Spanish positions around Santiago, Major General William R. Shafter, Commanding General of V Corps, moved his force into position. He dispatched Brigadier General Henry Lawton's division to assault El Caney, a hill on the American right, and directed the rest of his force to attack San Juan Hill.

With support from Captain Allyn Capron's battery of 3.2-inch field guns, Lawton's division climbed El Caney. Artillery fire had little effect on the Spanish on El Caney because Lawton, who was acting as his own chief of artillery, failed to mass fire on any particular target. In fact, his battery opened fire with shrapnel at what appeared to be a column of cavalry moving along the road from El Caney toward Santiago, fired a few shots at the blockhouse perched atop El Caney, hit a hedge with a few shots where enemy infantry appeared to be and then fired into the village on El Caney.

As Lawton struggled, the rest of the Americans

advanced against San Juan Hill. With Captain George S. Grimes's battery of four 3.2-inch guns providing close support and Captains Charles D. Parkhurst's and Clermont L. Best's batteries of 3.2-inch guns in reserve at the Corps Headquarters, the Americans attacked.

Grimes opened fire on a blockhouse and entrenchments on San Juan Hill at 2,500 yards, which was too far for effective fire. At the same time, white smoke from his guns marked his battery's position.

The Spanish had two smokeless-powder, 3-inch Krupp rapid-fire breechloaders to complement their obsolete muzzleloaders they converted to breechloaders. These Spanish rapid-fire guns went unspotted and mercilessly pounded the American battery. After 40 minutes of heavy artillery fire, which the Americans had difficulty returning, the Spanish drove the Americans from their guns. Two hours later, Grimes opened fire again to cover the infantry advance that was beginning to unfold.

Despite the inability of the American artillery to provide close support, American infantry and dismounted cavalry forced the Spanish to start retreating from San Juan Hill to their main line of defense. Encouraged by this, Dillenback moved Best's and Parkhurst's batteries forward to help. Before the two batteries could open fire, the infantry and dismounted cavalry had pushed the Spanish off San Juan Hill.

Subsequently, Dillenback advanced Best's battery to the top of the hill to within small-arms range. However, a Spanish counterattack drove the battery off the hill. Finally after tough fighting, the Americans held the hill and placed their three batteries on line with the infantry on 1 July 1897.

The following day, the American batteries opened fire with canister and shrapnel at a range of 500 yards. Once again, intense small-arms fire caused the Americans to withdraw their field guns. Although American Field Artillery played a minor role at San Juan Hill, the United States eventually compelled the Spanish to surrender.

Conclusion

As combat action indicated, the Americans never massed artillery fire. They employed their batteries piecemeal and failed to take advantage of the firepower of their field guns.

Equally importantly, the Americans employed tactics suited to smoothbore Field Artillery, not the rifled technology both sides were using, by positioning their guns on line with the infantry. This further precluded our massing fire. Obsolete guns and tactics restricted the role of the Field Artillery in Cuba.

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